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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 000532

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FOR NEA, PRM, AND AMBASSADOR FOLEY

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SUBJECT: UNHCR HIGH COMMISSIONER REVIEWS HIS TRIP TO THE  
REGION

REF: AMMAN 486

Classified By: DCM Daniel Rubinstein for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: UNHCR High Commissioner Antonio Guterres highlighted UNHCR's pleasure with the growing "consolidation of asylum space in the region" for Iraqi refugees in a February 18 meeting with the diplomatic and donor communities in Amman. The "relation of confidence" UNHCR has developed with host governments Syria and Jordan allows UNHCR to expand its registration and assistance programs. The HC also announced that the incoming UNHCR-Iraq Resident Representative and three additional senior international UNHCR staff will be based in Baghdad to help the GOI negotiate its divergent approaches in responding to displaced Iraqis, and to provide policy and technical assistance that will eventually support returns. The HC rebuffed a call to conduct needs assessments prior to implementing programs, claiming that UNHCR's expanded registration numbers (over 200,000 regionally) provide UNHCR sufficient needs and vulnerability data to target assistance. The HC also clarified that, while willing to coordinate its efforts with other UN agencies based on "added value," UNHCR would issue future regional appeals specific to its mandate independent from the UNAMI Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP). END SUMMARY.

Consolidation of Asylum Space in Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon  
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12. (SBU) UNHCR High Commissioner (HC) Antonio Guterres met with members of the diplomatic and donor community in Amman February 18 to review the highlights of his recent trip to Jordan, Syria, and Iraq and to solicit support for UNHCR's efforts in the region. The HC remarked that, compared to a year ago, there "is a real consolidation of asylum space in the region" and that he was encouraged by the "political attitude of host governments" in meeting the protection and assistance needs of Iraqi refugees. The HC cited: the recent release of more than 600 Iraqis in Lebanese detention and efforts in Beirut to regularize the status of Iraqis; categorical guarantees from King Abdullah of Jordan and President Asad of Syria that no Iraqi will be sent back to Iraq against their will; the governments' partnerships in expanding assistance programs - particularly in education and health - for Iraqi refugees; and the new presence of international NGOs in Syria as indications that host governments are becoming increasingly engaged in meeting the needs of Iraqi refugees.

13. (SBU) During his hour-long briefing, Guterres repeatedly praised Jordan, recounting successful meetings with King Abdullah, PM Dahabi, Minister of Planning (MOPIC) Suhair al Ali and Minister of State for Media and Communications

Affairs Nasser Judeh. While the HC looked forward to further clarification on the legal status of Iraqis in Jordan, he praised the King's unambiguous commitment to non-refoulement.

Guterres described the recent Jordanian amnesty of overstay fines for Iraqis seeking to return to Iraq (ref A) as an important, albeit symbolic, step forward. Unprompted, the HC cited MOPIC's role as a highly effective example of coordination of other service ministries (e.g. education and health).

¶4. (SBU) However, the HC cautioned that difficulties remain, including managing negative public opinion against Iraqis in host countries as citizens face rising prices, and the steadily deepening vulnerability of Iraqis refugees, largely due to economic duress. Guterres reminded donors that as the level of vulnerability increases, the level of assistance must increase at a commensurate level. The HC recognized the support the international community has provided to UNHCR over the past year, which has permitted UNHCR to develop a "relation of confidence" with host governments, in sharp contrast with a tangible resistance on the part of regional governments last year.

¶5. (C) Describing the Iraqi refugee caseload as the largest urban refugee population UNHCR has ever responded to - and noting the deepening needs of Iraqis due to exhausted savings and increasing prices - the HC highlighted that UNHCR needed to act rapidly. In response to a Swiss diplomat's query about conducting future UNHCR needs assessments, the HC said, in a reference to the FAFO experience in Jordan (reftel), that while he was willing to engage in a "theoretical discussion" of the numbers and needs of Iraqi refugees, he wasn't prepared to wait "five months" for the results. The HC also pointed out that while the numbers of Iraqis may be

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less in Jordan and Syria than the official estimates, UNHCR will not jeopardize its newly-effective relationships with host governments by publicly contradicting official figures without proof to the contrary. Guterres said he believes UNHCR's 2008 plans to include assistance needs and vulnerability criteria in expanded registration efforts will provide UNHCR sufficient information to adequately target assistance. He cited over 156,000 registrations in Syria and 52,000 in Jordan as evidence of the agency's knowledge of the needs of a sufficient number of Iraqi refugee families - noting repeatedly UNHCR's goal of distributing food to 360,000 beneficiaries in Syria in 2008 as an example.

¶6. (SBU) In addition, the HC affirmed UNHCR's plans to expand outreach activities in 2008, integrate assistance information provided by NGO and government partners to expand its "sample" of Iraqi needs, and increase the use of Iraqi volunteers to identify undiscovered pockets of Iraqis. Guterres discussed his desire to expand the geographic range of assistance programs, including opening UNHCR branches in Aleppo, Homs and Hasakeh, in addition to its main office in Damascus. UNHCR expects to attract increasing numbers of Iraqis to register, from which UNHCR will derive increasingly comprehensive needs information.

Unfinished business in Iraq

¶7. (C) The HC outlined the two goals of his Baghdad visit: to convince the GOI to reach out to Iraqis abroad and to confirm UNHCR's readiness to support voluntary returns to Iraq. The HC then described two disparate views within the GOI regarding refugee issues. According to Guterres, FM Zebari and some other senior leaders view returns as a humanitarian problem requiring the GOI to adopt a proactive approach to engage refugee-hosting countries and improve services to prepare Iraq for returns. Others, led by PM Maliki, view refugee issues through a political prism in which Iraqi refugee needs are exaggerated by the enemies of the government who want to provide support to wealthy "traitors."

¶8. (C) Following the briefing, acting UN Iraq ResRep Marco Roggia recounted the HC's meeting with Maliki, which he described as "polite warfare." Roggia said that during the meeting UNHCR chose to challenge the PM's assertions, trying to discern which of Maliki's aides might lean towards UNHCR positions. Roggia hoped that the new resident representative in Baghdad would be able to work with those aides to moderate Maliki's positions, but then lamented that "you can't sideline the Prime Minister." According to the HC, Maliki insisted that massive returns (citing the figure of 700,000 in the past several months) have been ignored. The Iraqi PM and others reportedly clung to the notion that massive returns are likely after the school year ends - a view not shared by UNHCR.

¶9. (SBU) Highlighting the constructive role a more robust UNHCR presence could bring to GOI policy discussions - and citing improvements in security as well as indications that political compromise is possible (as demonstrated by the recent passage of three significant contested bills), the HC announced his decision to base the incoming UNHCR-Iraq Resident Representative in Baghdad. Guterres said that it is no longer possible to fulfill the mission from Amman. The HC recounted that he had promised FM Zebari he would appoint the new ResRep within two weeks. Characterizing UN security requirements in Iraq as "out of control," the HC said SRSG Stefan de Mistura approved his request to supplement the Resident Representative with three additional international staff members in Baghdad, raising the total of international UNHCR staff in Baghdad to six. The HC relayed his concerns about the fragility of the situation in Iraq, highlighting the upcoming Kirkuk referendum, the possibility of a return to violence of heavily armed militias, the dearth of services supporting returnees, and the divisive potential of the refugee issue within the GOI. Guterres confirmed that UNHCR is not promoting returns now, but needs to step up its engagement inside Iraq to develop an environment conducive to voluntary returns.

¶10. (SBU) In response to a Canadian question on coordination of Iraq-related appeals, the HC repeated his desire to respond quickly to needs, and said he would expand UNHCR's coordination with UNAMI as long as the added value was based on improving response capacities and not because the "bureaucracy" required it. The HC also confirmed that the UNHCR's efforts are fully integrated into UNAMI's overall efforts, but that UNHCR will continue to issue a separate

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appeal for refugee work specific to its mandate outside of Iraq, rather than fold its appeal into the Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) for work with IDP communities in Iraq.  
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